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Joseph J. Petri

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JOSEPH J. PETRI.

JANUARY 30, 1874.—Committed to a Committee of the Whole House and ordered to be printed.

Mr. DUNNELL, from the Committee on Claims, submitted the following

REPORT:

[To accompany bill H. R. 1579.]

*Your committee, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 678) for the relief of Joseph J. Petri, with the accompanying papers, have had the same under consideration, and respectfully report:*

The following facts are set forth in the petition of the claimant, and sworn to by him:

March 4, 1849, leaving his family in Palestine, he started for California, being among the very first to go overland after the breaking out of the gold-fever. Saint Joseph, Mo., was the place of rendezvous. On the 2d of May a party of two hundred and forty persons, among whom were fourteen families, set out, with seventy-one wagons, for the journey over the plains. This party was made up from Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. At Fort Kearney, officers were elected to conduct them over the plains, Mr. Petri being third in command. They left Fort Kearney May 11, and arrived at Fort Laramie July 13. Here the party halted a few days for rest and repairs, where one of the men, Karl Troube, died of the cholera. At Green River, about twenty-five miles east of Salt Lake, it was determined to take what was known as the Lawson route, which was the farthest north of any route known. It was described in the guide-book as being five hundred miles shorter than any other, but it proved to be one thousand miles longer. The progress from this time was very slow, and some of the more active men became dissatisfied, and about thirty of them, under the lead of Mr. Petri, separated from the main party, and pushed through on the same route, arriving at Davis's Fork, in the Sacramento Valley, about the 12th of September. The main party, after enduring great hardships and abandoning nearly all their property, arrived on the 1st of November, in an exhausted condition. The men who accompanied Mr. Petri had gone immediately to mining, on their arrival, in the Feather River diggings. Many of them were very successful, Mr. Petri himself having secured about \$15,000 in gold before the main party arrived. All were making preparations for winter as best they could with their scanty stock of provisions, when news was received that a large party of emigrants were snow-bound on the waters of Deer Creek, between the Sierra Nevada and Trinity Mountains. The news was brought by Captain Peopels, of the United States Army, who had been sent from Pueblo with a squad of men to aid the emigrants. His men all perished in the snow, except Lieutenant Foster, without saving the emigrants, and Captain Peopels was so far exhausted that he died soon after bringing the news into the Sacramento Valley.

Governor Burnett, of California, immediately issued a proclamation calling for volunteers, and promising remuneration to any person who should carry relief to the emigrants. Twenty-four men volunteered, but only fourteen assembled at the place of rendezvous at the time agreed upon for their departure, November 27. Three of these were *vaqueros*, or cowherds, who in this case were Indians with a slight admixture of Spanish blood. The entire provision for the party was nine mules, nine head of cattle, two sacks of barley, two hundred pounds of flour, and a sack of coffee.

Thomas Ford, of Missouri, was chosen to command the expedition. All, except four of the cattle and five of the mules, were purchased by Mr. Petri, and more food would have been taken, but it could not be obtained. On the second day seven of the men refused to go farther. On the third day Captain Ford and all the other white men gave up in despair, leaving Mr. Petri and the three Indians, who all resolved to take

relief to the sufferers or perish in the attempt. The distance was about one hundred and twenty miles. The plan adopted was to slaughter a beef at intervals, and hang it on a tree for food on the return. For nine days they made good progress, when they came to snow so deep that it was necessary for the men to go forward and tramp it down before the mules could make their way through it. Five days were spent in this manner. On ascending Trinity Mountain they found less snow and made greater progress. From the top of Trinity Mountain, Mr. Petri believed, from his recollection of the route, that the emigrants were not more than ten or twelve miles distant. Here he slaughtered the last of the cattle, and had a beef and a half and all the flour and coffee packed on the mules, and for several days the party passed on through the deepening snow, and a little before sundown on the 21st of December they found a camp of seventy starving emigrants. Among these were twelve women and twenty-one children. The women were calm and easily controlled, but the men were half crazed and presented a wild and haggard appearance. Mr. Petri soon found that their food was entirely exhausted, having eaten all their horses and cattle, except such as had wandered off and were buried in the snow. These they continued to eat as long as they could find them by the tracks of the wolves and other wild beasts, but they had seemingly all left that part of the country on account of the snow. Mr. Petri found one large, fleshy man tied to a tree in the midst of the camp. Upon inquiring the cause, the other men reluctantly admitted that they had taken advantage of and tied him, because he was the most fleshy, as their next chance for food if no relief came. Upon being released he cried like a child. He was a lawyer by the name of James White, and was from Indianapolis, Ind. Mr. Petri says that the Indians were miracles of patient endurance and obedience, never failing to come to his assistance when called. He says they resolutely refused food, that the children might have it, when he knew they were almost famishing—and ever after, on meeting him, would express their love for him, by saying "*Massa Jo. Brave man.*"

Mr. Petri had all the flour baked on the first night after finding them, and put in sacks to feed the children on their return. Three of the strongest men made an attempt to take the bread for themselves, but a blast from his whistle brought the Indians promptly to his relief, and the men were brought under control and tied. They were released next day, under promise that they would submit to his directions, and were obedient to the end of the journey. From the blankets in camp sacks were made large enough to hold two or three children each, and then thrown across the mules. In that way they were conveyed, and, by the older persons walking, the whole party were rescued from what came so near being a living sepulcher. After they took up their line of march one woman was found in a wagon near the route, which made seventy-one persons rescued by the one white man and three Indians. They arrived in Sacramento Valley January 9, 1850, where the whole party was received with the wildest demonstrations of rejoicing by the emigrants who had made the journey safely.

After arriving in the valley and purchasing more food, at enormous prices, for the famished emigrants, Mr. Petri found his money exhausted, and after the excitement had subsided, he was taken sick, from which he but slowly recovered. On being restored to health, he commenced blacksmithing. He remained in California nearly three years, but never again met with success equal to that of the first six weeks, nearly all of which he had so generously expended in his heroic efforts to save the lives of his fellow men. On the 2d of August, 1852, he started home, via the Isthmus of Panama and joined his family on the 16th of September.

Mr. Petri has had eight children and two grandchildren, but they have all passed away, and his faithful wife died also February 19, 1872, and he is now all alone.

The foregoing statement is sustained by the affidavit of J. O. Harness and seven other citizens of Illinois; also by the affidavit of James T. Stark; also by the affidavit of Thomas Bennet, of the same State. The legislature of California in 1851 passed a memorial to Congress asking remuneration for the claimant.

The legislature of Illinois in 1871 passed the following resolution:

*Resolved by the house of representatives, (the senate concurring herein,) That our Senators in Congress be instructed and our Representatives requested to use all necessary and honorable efforts to secure an early and favorable consideration by Congress of the memorial of the said Joseph J. Petri for the services rendered and expenses incurred by him as aforesaid, whereby men, women, and children were rescued from a horrible death, and from privation and suffering of the most revolting character.*

The bill calls for an appropriation of thirty thousand dollars (\$30,000) to compensate the petitioner "for his personal efforts and money expended by him in rescuing from starvation and impending death a train

of emigrants who were snowed in between the Sierra Nevada and Trinity Mountains, in the months of November and December, 1849."

Your committee recommend that the sum of five thousand dollars (\$5,000) be appropriated and paid to Joseph J. Petri, in recognition of his sublime heroism in the rescue of seventy souls from a certain and terrible death in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in November and December, 1849, and report the accompanying bill as a substitute.